

THE UCOM STORY

By Jim Crooks

The founders of United Community Outreach Ministry (UCOM) believed they were beginning a journey of faith. They did not know the direction of their journey, or how they would reach their destination. But they did believe that their God would support them and lead the way.

The journey began in the summer of 1978. The recently formed Jacksonville Ecumenical Right to Eat Advocacy Board under the leadership of its president, Laura Gordon, and executive director, Ardith Highleyman, met with volunteers from five Southside churches: All Saints Episcopal, Lakewood Presbyterian, Mt. Olive Baptist, Mt Zion AME and South Jacksonville Presbyterian. They discussed the possibility of expanding the city's federally funded Meals-on-Wheels program to Pine Forest, a predominantly black and poor Southside community. On Saturday, September 30th, 29 volunteers from these churches canvassed Pine Forest and identified 31 potentially eligible low income recipients. Within two weeks, state agencies had verified their eligibility and volunteers from the five churches (with Lakewood United Methodist joining shortly thereafter) began delivering meals. Some observers felt that only the Holy Spirit could have moved a governmental agency to respond so quickly to meet this need.

Over the next six months, representatives from these and other churches met with Highleyman and Rev. Gene Parks, urban minister of the United Methodist Church, to determine how to expand these volunteer efforts on a permanent basis. On May 22, 1979, the informal Southside/Pine Forest Network of Churches became UCOM with Archie Jenkins, then a part time staff member at South Jacksonville Presbyterian Church, coordinating the effort.

The name was important. Should it be United Christian Outreach Ministry, or United

Community Outreach Ministry? All participants at that point were Christian, but a majority chose the term "Community" to welcome broader support later on. And of course later, Congregation Ahavath Chesed became a member.

The twelve charter churches were Assumption Catholic, Christ Lutheran (later withdrawing to be replaced by All Saints Episcopal), Hendricks Avenue Baptist, Lakewood United Methodist, Lakewood Presbyterian, Mt. Olive Baptist, Mt. Zion AME, St. Mark's Lutheran, San Jose Catholic, South Jacksonville Presbyterian, Southside Baptist and Southside United Methodist.

On July 10, 1979, UCOM members elected their first slate of officers, to include:

President: Rev. William S. Thirlwell, Southside Baptist Church
 First Vice President: Pat Blajian, Assumption Catholic Church
 Second Vice President: Vernell Taylor, Mt. Zion AME Church
 Secretary: Sharon Cooke, All Saints Episcopal Church
 Treasurer: Deacon James Thomas, Mt. Olive Baptist Church
 Finance Committee Chair: Bob Gordon, Lakewood Presbyterian Church
 Program Committee Chair: Dr. Jim Burt, Southside United Methodist Church

Shortly thereafter, UCOM's program of delivering meals on wheels under the leadership of Mary Burt expanded to serve homebound elderly and disabled recipients who could afford to pay for their meals, in Pine Forest and across the Southside. Over the next twenty years, UCOM would serve 240,000 meals to 48,000 recipients. Currently, Henri King ably supervises the delivery of 15,000 meals per year.

The next major step along UCOM's faith journey came in 1983. A year earlier, the session of Lakewood Presbyterian Church had allocated \$5000 to begin a minority youth employment program (MYEP) in Pine Forest, recognizing the very high unemployment rate among minority youths. The program initially subsidized one-half the cost of the summer jobs which became an

attraction for employers. The challenge of raising funds, recruiting young people and finding employers was too big for one church to do alone, so Lakewood turned to UCOM for help. With the support of Katie Davis at the Pine Forest Community Center and volunteers like Vernell Taylor, Rev. Lib McGregor Simmons, Shep Johnson, Henry Jones, Bill Tierney, Jim Crooks and others, UCOM found jobs that year for 35 young people.

In 1984, UCOM volunteers saw the potential for a year round program for youth in Pine Forest. A part time, paid program director was needed to support this expansion of MYEP. That fall, Prudential Insurance Company offered UCOM a grant to hire Nathaniel S. Washington as that part time program director. He became the answer to prayers. Former Douglas Anderson High School teacher and football coach, Nat, or Coach as he was known to the Douglas Anderson alumni, knew the Pine Forest community well. More important, though he lived on the Northside, Nat's heart remained with the folks in Pine Forest.

Beginning that fall, Nat Washington made the MYEP work. He recruited all of the Pine Forest churches into UCOM to gain community support for the program. He met weekly with the youth offering outreach programs, fund raising opportunities and job preparation. Over the years, the young people took trips to Florida A&M University, Bethune Cookman College, Edward Waters College and the University of North Florida to learn about college and career opportunities. They sold hot dogs and cokes at Gator Bowl football games to raise funds for their trips. And they learned how to dress, prepare for and apply for their summer jobs. Meanwhile, Coach found the jobs, assured employers that he would keep tabs on their new employees, and urged his young people to call him, day or night, if they had any problems. Since 1984, Nat Washington has helped more than 1400 minority youth succeed in their first job experiences.

With two programs successfully underway, UCOM began to respond to the challenge of emergency assistance. Every church along the Hendricks Avenue--San Jose Boulevard corridor received calls for help by phone or in person from people in distress. During the spring and summer of 1986, Rev. Lib McGregor Simmons from Lakewood Presbyterian Church and Rev. Gene Zimmerman from Southside United Methodist Church called UCOM clergy together to discuss the need for a centralized emergency assistance program that provided effective help and eliminated costly duplication of services. The result was the creation of the UCOM Emergency Assistance Program which opened in November, 2, 1987 under the direction of its part time paid coordinator, Frances Walker. She too was an answer to prayers, and she made providing assistance her mission in life.

The program began with very limited funding sources and no home. It was another faith venture. Southside Baptist Church donated rent-free an old building on the corner of Hendricks Avenue and Atlantic Boulevard (since replaced by an office building). The Rev. Roosevelt Marell, then UCOM vice-president for emergency assistance, refurbished the structure with help from volunteers. In the beginning, UCOM provided emergency food, financial assistance for housing, utilities, medical prescriptions and local travel vouchers, and counselling. It subsequently provided clothing. It kept careful records to prevent duplication of services. To assist with long-range needs, the Center networked with other community agencies. Currently located at 1603 Minerva Avenue Street, UCOM's Emergency Assistance Program has assisted over the years more than 32,000 clients. Most of all, Frances Walker and her volunteers have provided an atmosphere of faith, hope and caring for people in need.

Meanwhile, one of UCOM's founders, Archie Jenkins, reflected upon the shortage of

trained nursing assistants in the community to provide support for elderly, infirm or disabled residents. He called Nat Washington. As a result, in the fall of 1988, UCOM began a joint venture in Pine Forest with Florida Community College at Jacksonville training adults to become nursing assistants. Since then, more than 300 people have upgraded their skills and their wages from this program directed by Washington.

To describe the programs of community service is only part of UCOM's presence in the Southside. The twelve original congregations have grown to 32 congregations, black and white, Protestant, Catholic and Jewish. UCOM began celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday in 1985 with a community worship service on Friday evening, a youth program Saturday mornings in Pine Forest, and a community banquet Saturday night featuring a successful Douglas Anderson High School alumnus as its speaker.

In 1988, UCOM joined with Church World Service to initiate the first CROP walk in Jacksonville where three-fourths of the funds raised go to combat world hunger and one-quarter goes for local emergency assistance. Two years later, UCOM sponsored a fall concert of sacred music by participating UCOM churches to bring congregations together and raise funds for emergency assistance. UCOM also participates with the National Conference for Community and Justice (formerly National Conference of Christians and Jews) in an annual Thanksgiving service that dates back to 1918.

The faith journey of UCOM congregations has been a response to God's call to feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked, teach children and reach out to all peoples in need. For twenty years, UCOM has served God in Jacksonville's Southside with faith, hope and love.

The End

UCOM Presidents

1979-80, Rev. Bill Thirlwell, Southside Baptist Church
 1980-81, John Finn, San Jose Catholic Church
 1981-82, ???
 1982-83, Sister Nancy Corrigan, Diocese of St. Augustine
 1983-84, Sister Nancy Corrigan/Rev. Bill Thirlwell
 1984-85, Jim Crooks, Lakewood Presbyterian Church
 1985-86, Jim Crooks
 1986-87, Jim Crooks
 1987-88, Jim Crooks
 1988-89, Carolyn Matthews (now Ettlinger), Lakewood Presbyterian Church
 1989-90, Rev. John Nicolson, Lakewood Presbyterian Church
 1990-91, no president (UCOM vice-presidents shared leadership)
 1991-92, Marian Elliott, Southside United Methodist Church
 1992-93, Marian Elliott
 1993-94, Marian Elliott
 1994-95, Rev. Vicki Thomas, Lakewood Presbyterian Church
 1995-96, Kate Schellenberg, San Jose Catholic Church
 1996-97, Kate Schellenberg
 1997-98, Rev. Wayne Wiatt, Southside United Methodist Church
 1998-99, Rev. Mark Wilbanks, Southside Baptist Church

UCOM Treasurers

1979-89, Deacon James Thomas, Mt. Oliver Baptist Church
 1978-84, Archie Jenkins, South Jacksonville Presbyterian Church
 1984-97, Waverly Fant, South Jacksonville Presbyterian Church
 1997-present, Bonnie Redlinger,

Meals-on-Wheels Coordinators

1979-80, Mary Burt
 1980-84, Carolyn Matthews (now Ettlinger)
 1985-86, Beverly Whitfield
 1986-87, Cindy Carr
 1987-88, Kyle Flynn,
 1987-88, Elizabeth Johnson
 1988-present, Henri King

Pine Forest Minority Youth Program Coordinators

1983-84, Vernell Taylor and Klay Brickell
 1984-present, Nathaniel S. Washington

UCOM Emergency Services Program Coordinator

1987-present, Frances Walker

UCOM-URBANSERV, INC.
Jacksonville, FL 32211
January 25, 1991

Resolved, that UCOM (United Community Outreach Ministry) Meals On Wheels Program merge with the South Jacksonville Presbyterian Church Meals On Wheels Program under the direction of UCOM. Specifically, this means keeping the UCOM routes in place, and the South Jacksonville Presbyterian Church routes in place, with their routes, drivers, food sources, and recipients, and locations.

This agreement is contingent upon a successful transition.

This is the action by the Board of Directors of UCOM at a specially called meeting at Lakewood Presbyterian Church on January 25, 1991.

Respectfully Submitted,

Waverly Fant, Acting Secretary